Carmel: God Turning Hearts Back:

The Challenge, the Emptiness, and the Truth

"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them" (Psalm 115: 4–8).

Introduction

The core message of what happened on Mount Carmel is found in Elijah's prayer from 1 Kings 18:37: "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." The turning of hearts back to God shows the true purpose behind the entire event. It was not a showdown between one prophet and hundreds of false prophets, although it was certainly dramatic. It was not only about a display of power, even though God's power would be unforgettable that day. At its heart, this was an act of grace, reaching out to a people who had strayed far from the God of their ancestors.

The three and a half years of drought had been intended to produce repentance in Israel, but the early verses of chapter 18 show no indication that any such change had occurred. The nation appeared as hardened as ever, as illustrated by King Ahab's preoccupation with finding grass for his horses rather than addressing the sin that had brought judgment. Yet God, as Psalm 102:13 declares, has appointed times to show favor, and by His grace, that appointed time had now come for Israel. In judgment and in wrath, He remembers mercy (Habakkuk 3:2). But sin must still be dealt with. In the words of Matthew Henry, "The people must be brought to repent and reform, and then they may look for the removal of the judgment, but not till then."[1]

It is helpful to consider how God, through His servant Elijah, brought about this change of heart. How does a group move from the silence of 1 Kings 18:21, when Elijah's challenge was met with no reply, to falling facedown and crying out in 18:39, "The Lord, he is God; The Lord, he is God"? The passage points to three key elements: the challenge itself, the exposure of the emptiness of false religion, and the reality of true faith. This study will take up the first two. The

[1] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1706), commentary on 1 Kings 18:21,40.

third and final element, the reality of true religion on Mount Carmel, will be the subject of our concluding study.

The Challenge: A Call for Decision

The first step in turning the people's hearts back to the Lord was a challenge, and Elijah issued two of them. The first was addressed not to the false prophets but directly to the people of Israel. It was a challenge to the conscience: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (18:21). The people said nothing.

Even their silence is telling. It shows that the Israelites had not fully turned their backs on the true God. They still felt a connection to their identity as God's covenant people and were not ready to abandon it all. At the same time, they were not willing to give up Baal either. Baal worship was popular, encouraged by those in power, allowed for moral flexibility, and did not require the same kind of single-minded loyalty that the covenant with Jehovah did. Faced with a difficult choice, they did what people often do: they tried to have it both ways, taking the parts they liked from each and ignoring the tension between them.

It would be a big mistake to think this pattern was unique to ancient Israel. The same divided heart exists in every era. Today, there are plenty of people who know enough of the gospel not to reject it outright, who keep some outward link to faith, and who would not call themselves unbelievers. Yet they have no intention of letting go of the worldly things that directly conflict with Christ's claims. They try to balance both worlds, but as Elijah's challenge suggests, that leaves them belonging to neither. Arthur Pink pointed out how this issue was just as relevant in his own time.

> "Religions which are diametrically opposed cannot both be right: one must be wrong, and as soon as the true is discovered, the false must be cast to the winds. The present-day application of Elijah's demand would be this: If Christ of Scripture be the true Saviour, then surrender to Him; if the christ of modern Christendom, then follow him. One who demands the denying of self, and another who allows the gratifying of self, cannot both be right. One who requires the uncompromising mortification of sin, and another who suffers you to trifle with it, cannot both be the Christ of God."[2]

[2]Arthur W. Pink, *The Life of Elijah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 123.

The issue Elijah faced on Mount Carmel is the same problem that easy-believism has always caused within the church. The idea that someone can accept Christ as Savior while still clinging to the sins He came to free us from goes against the entire teaching of Scripture. The gospel is a call to discipleship and obedient living according to God's Word. People cannot be fully committed to the Lord without repenting of sin, just as Israel could not serve both Baal and Jehovah.

Being a believer in the world always comes at a cost. Our Savior said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” (Matthew 16:24–27). When religion is only outward and formal, people will follow it only up to a point. When it demands things that run counter to their heart's desires, they will see it as too much and discard it. What is needed is not a more comfortable religion but a true turning of the heart. This can only be accomplished by the power of the Spirit of God.

Elijah’s challenge reminds us of Joshua’s words at Shechem, when Israel first entered Canaan and faced the temptation of the local gods. Joshua told the people, “Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15). This kind of either-or decision is always before us. There is never really any neutral ground in the Christian life.

This exclusivity is one of the things people find most difficult about the Christian faith. The claim that there is only one way to have sins forgiven, only one name under heaven by which men must be saved (Acts 4:12), strikes the modern humanistic mind as narrow and intolerant. But it is precisely what Elijah was saying on Mount Carmel. God and Baal cannot both be true. They cannot both answer by fire. And the exclusive claim of the gospel is not the invention of narrow minds but the declaration of the God who is, and who does not share His glory with another. Roger Ellsworth reflects carefully on this dimension of Elijah’s challenge.

> Ultimately, there is only one question which really matters. It is not what everyone else believes or does. It is not what gives us the most pleasure and

> comfort. It is this—What is true? If Christianity is not true, it is time to throw away the whole thing—lock, stock and barrel—and to fling ourselves into wholehearted devotion to the popular opinions and lifestyles of the day. But if Christianity is true, it is time to stop trying to water it down and begin living it properly. The crying need of the hour is for Christians to stop thinking there is some light in the world's darkness and some darkness in God's light. Christians cannot be fence-sitters in a world that cries out for direction and guidance. Jesus himself addressed this matter of vacillation in no uncertain terms: 'No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon' (Matt. 6:24).[3]

The people's silence in response to Elijah's first challenge is telling in its own way. Maybe they knew deep down that he was right and had no argument left. When the Word of God speaks directly to the conscience, it often leaves us quiet before we finally give in. The challenge had been put out in the open. Now, the second challenge would give them something they could not ignore.

The second challenge, found in 1 Kings 18:22–24, appealed to the people's reasoning. While the first challenge basically said, "You have to choose," the second gave them a clear way to see which choice was right. Two sacrifices would be prepared: one by the prophets of Baal and one by Elijah. The God who answered by sending fire to consume the offering would be shown as the true God. This time, the people did have a response. They agreed with the terms of the challenge by saying, "It is well spoken" (18:24).

The choice of fire for the test was not arbitrary. You might wonder why Elijah did not choose water, especially since rain was desperately needed during the drought. But before God's blessing of rain could come, something more fundamental had to be settled. The sin of God's people had to be addressed. In the sacrificial system outlined in the Law of Moses, fire consuming the sacrifice symbolized that God accepted the offering, showing His anger was appeased by the substitute. This is seen in Leviticus 9:24, when fire came out from the Lord's presence and consumed the offering, and again in 1 Chronicles 21:26, where God answered David with fire from heaven. Arthur Pink provides us with his thoughts on Elijah's choice of fire.

---

[3]Roger Ellsworth, *Standing for God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 58–59.

> The drought was a Divine judgment upon the idolatrous country and God's wrath must be appeased before His judgment could be averted. And this leads us to the deeper meaning of this remarkable drama. There can be no reconciliation between a holy God and sinners save on the ground of atonement, and there can be no atonement or remission of sins except by the shedding of blood. Divine justice must be satisfied: the penalty of the broken law must be inflicted, either on the guilty culprit or upon an innocent substitute. And this grand and basic truth was unmistakably set before the eyes of that assembled host on Mount Carmel. A bullock was slain, cut in pieces, and laid upon wood, and He who caused fire to descend and consume that sacrifice avouched Himself to be the true and only God of Israel. The fire of God's wrath must fall either on the guilty people or on a sacrificial substitute.[4]

So, this second challenge was not just about which god had more power. It was really about which god could bring redemption for sin. Could this god, whoever he was, handle human sin? Could he accept a sacrifice and prove it by sending fire? That was the question Mount Carmel was called to answer. With the terms set and agreed on, the 450 prophets of Baal stepped up to take their turn first.

The Emptiness of False Religion

1 Kings 18:25–29 recounts what happened when the prophets of Baal took their turn. They called on Baal's name from morning until noon. They danced around the altar they had built. They cried louder and cut themselves with swords and spears until blood flowed. They raved on until the evening sacrifice, and as verse 29 states simply, “No one answered; no one paid attention.” The scene is very strange and sad, yet also very instructive because it reveals the emptiness of false religion more effectively than any argument or apologetic could ever do.

The first thing the behavior of the prophets of Baal shows is that those who follow false religion are blinded and deceived by the god of this world. There is no other good explanation for the frantic, self-destructive, ultimately pointless display they put on that hillside. The Apostle Paul explains this blindness clearly in II Corinthians 4:4: “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” The prophets of Baal were not just wrong in their beliefs. They were spiritually blind, unable to see what was plainly in front of them and engaged in actions that could not produce any results because they were based on a falsehood. Sadly,

[4]Pink, *The Life of Elijah*, 131.

nothing has truly changed in our modern world. The false gods may have different names today, but the blindness is the same. Satan is still the great deceiver, and his business is to blind the minds of unbelievers lest they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.

We should note that this blindness manifested itself in a fundamental misconception of who God is and what He requires of man. The prophets of Baal believed that by slashing themselves until blood flowed, they could propitiate their deity by the shedding of their own blood. This is the logic of false religion in every form: that man must somehow earn or compel the favor of God through his own effort and merit. A distorted view of God leads inevitably to a distorted way of living. If the mind holds a false conception of God and His Word, all religious striving will be misdirected and end in futility. From the very beginning, the evil one, the destroyer of souls, has sought to deceive us about the character of God. Satan's words to Eve, "Did God actually say...?" mark his first recorded attempt to make her doubt the goodness of her Creator (Genesis 3:1-6).

Most importantly, the scene on Mount Carmel shows that false religion can never meet humanity's deepest need. Everyone was looking for an answer. The rules of the contest were made clear in 1 Kings 18:24. The god who answers by fire is God. The fire was not just for show; it was a sign that a sacrifice was accepted, sin was paid for, and God's anger was satisfied. The prophets of Baal never saw any fire, not because their god did not care, but because there was no real god there to answer them! False religion is unable to solve the problem of sin because it does not know the Holy God who has been offended and has no sacrifice that can actually satisfy Him.

It is important to point out that the reason Baal's prophets could not produce fire was not because of a lack of supernatural power willing to help them. Scripture clearly shows that, with God's permission, the devil can sometimes produce fire. We see this in Job 1:16, as well as in the actions of the beast in Revelation 13:13, who performs signs, including causing fire to come down from heaven. God did not allow that on Mount Carmel. The silence of heaven over the altar of Baal was His sovereign act, His choice not to permit a false display to overshadow the truth that was about to be revealed. In this, we observe the gracious hand of the covenant God working to restore rebellious Israel.

The prophets of Baal illustrate the uselessness of prayer when it is directed to a god who does not exist. Their prayers were numerous, fervent, sustained, and increasingly desperate. None of it made any difference, because the object of their prayer was not there to receive it. Pink comments helpfully about this sad event. He writes,

> There was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded. How this exposed the powerlessness of false gods. They are impotent creatures, unable to help their votaries in the hour of need. They are useless for this life; how much more so for the life to come! Nowhere does the imbecility which sin produces more plainly evidence itself than in idolatry. It makes utter fools of its victims, as was manifest there on Carmel. The prophets of Baal reared their altar and placed upon it the sacrifice, and then called upon their god for the space of six hours to evidence his acceptance of their offering. But in vain. Their importunity met with no response: the heavens were as brass. No tongue of fire leaped from the sky to lick up the flesh of the slain bullock. The only sound heard was the cries of anguish from the lips of the frantic priests as they maltreated themselves till their blood gushed forth.[5]

The importance of this observation to our current time is clear. There is no shortage of prayer in the world. Multitudes pray daily with genuine sincerity and earnestness to gods who cannot hear them.[6] The tragedy of many false religions is not the lack of devotion but the object to which they pray. Prayer is only as effective as the God to whom it is directed, and only the Triune God who has revealed Himself in Scripture hears and answers prayer. With the help of the Holy Spirit, our prayers are heard because of our great mediator. "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

The events of 1 Kings 18:25–29 remind us that a religion can stir up strong emotions and still be completely false. The prophets of Baal showed plenty of passion. There was intensity, physical energy, and what looked like real sincerity, but none of that was enough. Sincerity does not create truth, and emotion will not take the place of a living God. People in every generation have been misled by this, confusing an emotional religious experience with a true encounter with God. Pink addresses this point with his usual clarity.

---

[5]Pink, *The Life of Elijah*, 140.

[6] For the devout Muslim, Islam requires five prayers each day: Fajr (dawn), Dhuhr (midday), Asr (afternoon), Maghrib (sunset), and Isha (night). These can be performed individually anywhere clean, but congregational prayer at the mosque offers greater spiritual reward.

> Let us state it thus: the expenditure of great earnestness and enthusiasm is no proof of a true and good cause. There is a large class of shallow-minded people today who conclude that a display of religious zeal and fervour is a real sign of spirituality, and that such virtues fully compensate for whatever lack of knowledge and sound doctrine there may be. 'Give me a place,' say they, 'where there is plenty of life and warmth even though there be no depth to the preaching, rather than a sound ministry which is cold and unattractive.' Ah, my reader, all is not gold that glitters. Those prophets of Baal were full of earnest zeal and fervour, but it was in a false cause, and brought down nothing from Heaven! Then take warning therefrom, and be guided by God's Word and not by what appeals to your emotions or your love of excitement.[7]

Conclusion: The Need for Evangelism

The five characteristics of false religion shown by the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, namely the blindness of its followers, the wrong ideas about God it produces, its inability to deal with sin, the futility of its prayers, and its power to stir up emotion without truth, are not merely quirks of ancient Canaanite worship. They accurately describe the condition of any religion outside of Christ in every age. The story of Mount Carmel, though it may seem distant or strange to modern ears, is in reality a diagnosis of the human heart apart from God's grace, and it remains as relevant today as it was in the days of Elijah.

This diagnosis highlights how urgent evangelism and missions truly are. The god of this world has blinded many people through false religion, but the same God who turned Israel's hearts back to Himself on Mount Carmel can break through that blindness today. William Carey understood this when he brought the gospel to India in the early 1800s, reaching people deeply rooted in Hinduism. Those who share the gospel in the Muslim world today do so with the same confidence. The gospel is not one option among many. It is the only message that can answer the question everyone is truly asking, the very question that drew the whole nation to Mount Carmel: how can a holy God deal with sin? That answer came in fire on Mount Carmel, and it came in its fullest and final form at the cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The real question is not whether our non-Christian friends and neighbors need the gospel. The five marks of false religion make that obvious enough. The question is whether we, like Elijah, will have the courage to stand before a confused and lost generation and declare, “The

[7]Pink, *The Life of Elijah*, 141.

Lord, He is God." Every believer carries that message. Every church is, in a sense, a Mount Carmel, a place where the true God is proclaimed in the midst of a world bowing at other altars. May we be faithful to share that truth clearly and boldly, with the deep compassion of people who once stood in darkness ourselves before being called into His marvelous light.